



Date: November 19, 2003

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Western Washington Yacht Builders Gain New Skills Through Innovative Partnership

ANACORTES – An innovative public-private partnership in Northwest Washington is training workers in the latest methods of building yachts. The program helps assure the region's custom boat manufacturers remain competitive both locally and internationally.

"The training provided by this partnership is addressing a critical skills gap and helping our company become a model for others in the business," said Wes Fridell, human resources manager for Northern Marine. The Anacortes company builds custom yachts priced in the millions for those with a desire for luxury.

The partnership was formed after company officials at Northern Marine approached local colleges and workforce agencies in the WorkSource system with the need to upgrade the skills of current workers and to enhance skills of workers coming into the business. A recent survey showed local boat manufacturers expect to hire as many as 300 workers in the coming year. Yet, there have been few opportunities for workers to learn the specialized skills needed to work in the field.

The Northwest Workforce Development Council received a \$213,000 grant from the Washington State Employment Security Department to develop training to meet the needs of Northern Marine and other boat manufacturers.

The funds were used to create a comprehensive training program, develop assessments to measure workers' competency in the new skills, and establish curriculum to teach other instructors how to replicate the training elsewhere. Northern Marine matched the grant with in-kind donations that include paying wages to workers while they were in training.

"We identified a huge need for training that covered the skills needed in boat manufacturing, as well as the latest technologies," said project manager Dolores Blueford, of the Northwest Workforce Development Council. "We formed a partnership to provide opportunities for workers to gain skills needed to earn better wages and become more productive, thereby allowing local businesses to be more competitive and profitable."

Northern Marine, Skagit Valley College, and the Northwest Workforce Development Council collaborated to create the courses, which will ultimately include modules in safety, electrical, carpentry, and resin infusion lamination. Classes are taught at Northern Marine. Since July, approximately 150 workers have participated. They receive industry certification for each module they complete.

Northern Marine officials are most excited about the resin infusion training, which will be offered in the early part of next year. Company President Richard "Bud" LeMieux said the new technology is safer than traditional fiberglass lamination processes and more environmentally friendly. Northern Marine introduced resin infusion into its processes last year. But until now, no adequate training was available in this production process.

LeMieux said Northern Marine has much to gain by helping to establish industry skill standards for resin infusion and a related training program for its employees.

“Our company is reaping the benefits that come with having a highly skilled workforce,” he said. “At the same time, we are providing the opportunity for our workers to receive training and experience that will result in higher wages. There’s also the potential for community colleges to use the new curriculum to offer training for people who want to find work in the boat-building industry.”

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